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ABSTRACT

Current developmental theory and research are inadequate in explaining the development of rural youth, but a mid-1970s study of adolescents from a small Maine community provided three patterns of growth and suggested four lessons for social service professionals who work with rural adolescents. The study of "Sawyer, Maine" (a pseudonym) attempted to documet the manner in which youth view adulthood and their own movement toward it by focusing on 46 youth between the ages of 17 and 24. Major themes for the age span included high school, work, marriage, and the community. Three growth patterns emerged which could be offered as abstracted and "purified" developmental paths--about 50% of the youth were "traditional," 40% were "modern-achieving," and about 10% were "questioning." Those who work with rural youth should (1) learn four lessons about the distinctiveness of rural community membership: a single conception of development violates the integrity and diversity of rural peoples and cultures; (2) learn to differentiate among youth, their aspirations, and the models they draw upon in defining adulthood; (3) remember small community membership has an immense influence on individual development; and (4) work towards ways to bridge the worlds of native rural communities and rural America without denegrating one or the other. (BRR)

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GROWING UP MEANS MOVING AWAY:

DEVELOPMENTAL DILEMMA FOR THE RURAL ADOLESCENT

by

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Orono, Maine 1984

Revision of a paper presented at the National/Second International Institute on Social Work in Rural Areas (9th, Orono, July 28-31, 1984).

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Abstract

Rural youth experience dilemmas as they grow toward adulthood which are uncommon to their suburban and urban peers and seldom treated in theory or research. Many of these arise from youth's membership in traditional rural communities which cannot offer sustaining work for their adult lives. This paper explores the forces of tradition and community on the one hand and the pressures to find work and to succeed in the "modern" world on the other as they shape the lives of rural youth. The discussion suggests an important interplay between native youths' lives and developmental paths and the survival of indigenous rural communities and cultures.

After briefly noting the inadequacies of current theory and research in explaining the development of rural youth, the paper cursorily examines data on youth from one rural community. The examination includes patterns of choice open to youth and the variations among youths' interpretations of their options and their definitions of growing up. Finally, the paper suggests lessons for social service professionals as they help youth, their families, and their communities build constructive future lives.

For a century, America has witnessed the movement of rural youth from their native communities toward urban centers. Long considered the result of economic realities, the personal and cultural sides of rural outmigration have received inadequate attention. Of all the members of the rural community, it is the adolescent who in experiencing the press to move away feels most poignantly the brunt of the rural community's decline. In short, the rural community's condition has enormous impacts on the development and life paths of its youth which have gone unstudied too long.

For the young rural man or woman of 16 or 17, the decision to remain within the community or to leave it overlays numerous other decisions: to inherit traditional work of questionable profitability or to move away for more stable and lucrative employment; to slip into the comfortable if "backward" traces of traditional adulthood or to "step out" into the modern world and its more diverse adult life styles; to embrace family and community roles or to test oneself against the "challenges" of mainstream life. While the rural community struggles to maintain itself, the native adolescent struggles to grow up without having to sever him/herself from either the native culture or the grander American scene. That geographic isolation forces many rural youth to choose one or the other makes their development more treacherous than that of many suburban or urban youth.

This paper is an investigation into the choice matrices of the rural adolescent in transition to adulthood. After suggesting that developmental theory inadequately explains traditional rural growth patterns, the paper turns to a case study to examine themes in rural youths' choices which illuminate our understanding of their developmental dilemmas. Such illumination provides several "lessons" for social service and educational

personnel whose clientele includes rural adolescents.

Inadequacies of Theory

We are not well equipped to understand the developmental dilemmas of rural youth. Developmental theory, in fact, presents a picture of healthy growth which appears to discriminate against the native rural adolescent. Major theorists depict an adulthood of intimate and fulfilling relationships and productive work as a state which is typically reached through a struggle with and eventual separation from one's childhood community. While the separation is not necessarily geographic for many youth, it practically always must be for the rural youth. Traditionally uniform and often conservative values in the community prohibit experimentation and option-testing while at home; distances to more pliant environments make it nearly impossible to live at home and taste regularly of the options for freedom, independence, and identity present in such environments.

When viewed through the prism of developmental theory, the rural adolescent faces a paradox: he/she can grow up, but in the process he/she will have to move away. Erik Erikson's youth struggles free of childhood attachments, gropes in a lonely and standardless sea for a firm sense of personal identity, then realizes the commonality he/she shares with other humans and becomes capable of intimacy and meaningful work. Jean Piaget's youth experiences the dissolution of childhood's concrete world, a world of hard-and-fast meanings and of safely ordered relationships, to enable development of a new, more complicated and flexible system of meanings in adulthood. Lawrence Kohlberg's youth discovers the inadequacy of societal explanations for moral rights and wrongs, lives through a period of universal doubts, and moves toward the quest for more profound truths and a new solidarity with humankind.

The adolescent, in each view, inevitably discovers the inadequacies of his/her childhood world -- the world, for rural youth, of the rural community. Development toward adulthood, and here is the paradox, then becomes a process of increasingly individual and lonely self-searching that ends in the discovery of attachments to people and ideas outside the community and of abstracted principles and relativistic thinking. The developmental model is a model of movement from integration with a particular community, a community of faces and names and particular history, to an integration with the universal community, the community of all humans and of metaphysical principles and truths.

While this brief and oversimplified summary cannot apply to all youth, we have little direct data about its application to rural adolescents, a group notably absent at the origins of these theories. Yet the theories imply that the rural youth who remains in his/her native community is less likely to mature into a healthy adulthood than his/her counterpart who leaves. Evidence, both scientific and popular, tends to corroborate this view of the developmentally deficient rural adolescent (and thus adult). Douvan and Adelson's national study of adolescents, for example, treats rural adolescents as a "subculture" which is "less advanced" phychologically than its suburban or urban counterparts. Such conclusions can also be found in the migration studies of the past half century which advance the theory that migration draws the cream off the top of rural populations. Theory and studies appear to corroborate the popular image of the listless, narrow-minded, unfulfilled rural young adult, an image which itself creates serious self-doubt in rural young.

A Case Study

For many of us who live and work in rural communities, neither the developmentalist's view nor the sketchy studies of rural youth nor the popular view rings true. Successful emergence into adulthood, however we define it, need not require removal from community, an hegira for personal truth through the diverse outer world, and a testing of oneself in unknown travails. In a case study of youth in one rural community, I attempted to document the manner in which youth did view adulthood and their own movement toward it. My goal was to determine the extent to which rural youth feel a conflict between the "modern" maturity noted above and their attachment to their native communities and their own culturally determined adult roles.

My work focused on native youth, 17-24, who were resident in the community (native meant at least third generation in town). Through interviews, I examined the decisions these youth had made and were making about their residence, their work, and their personal lives. I then attempted to ascertain the role of community ties in these decision. I found a range of developmental conditions amongst the forty-six youth I interviewed. For most, a central theme was the attempt to reconcile attachments to community and past with a desire -- or economic need -- to be a part of the modern American mainstream.

Sawyer, Maine, in the mid-1970's had a population of 700, fifty-six of whom fell between the ages of 17 and 24 and were native to Sawyer. These fifty-six constituted the "native nonmigrant" group which we studied; they were 73% of the total native population in their age cohort; that is, twenty-six of their native peers had migrated from Sawyer. I interviewed forty-six of the fifty-six nonmigrants.

For the purposes of my study, the population broke down as follows:

Native Sawyer Youth, 17-24, in 1975

	TOTAL NATIVE POPULATION N = 82		INTERVIEW SAMPLE OF NONMIGRANTS N = 46 (of 56)				
	Nonmigrant	Migrant	Employed	Married	Left and Returned	Went on to School	Total
Female	18	17	16	13	1	5	18
Male	38	9	25	3	6	2	28
Total	56	26	41	16	7	7	46

In the course of the study, three patterns of migration surfaced which have a bearing on this discussion. First, outmigration appears more likely to occur as the Sawyer youth nears the end of the 17 to 24 age span. We might infer from this that personal changes in the rural community -- the products of development -- during the 17 to 24 period make the decision to leave the community increasingly possible for some youth. Second, women appear more likely to migrate than do men. Once again, the conditions within Sawyer, expectations about conditions outside Sawyer, and perhaps opportunities to leave appear to favor the departure, and perhaps the developmental diversity, of rural women. Third, there seems to be no appreciable difference in outmigration across social class; in my population of 82 native youth, class distinctions did not discriminate between migrants and nonmigrants.

Major Themes: School, Work, Marriage, and Sawyer

To address native Sawyer perceptions of growing up and moving away, I first collected forty-six migrant youths' views on life in Sawyer and on their experiences "since high school". Several general themes characterize the thinking of these youth.

At the early end of the 17 to 24 age span, high school dominated youths' lives. The entire sample, with one exception, graduated from Lakeland Regional High School. Most had mixed memories of the school. Their years there were active and fun; the school gave most of them an exciting social life and the chance to experience the world immediately beyond Sawyer in a structured manner. On the other hand, youth held a common notion that the school looked down upon Sawyer people, that Sawyer kids had been tracked below their potential and excluded from activities by the competitive practices of a large consolidated high school. Graduation thus released Sawyer youth from a domineering and somewhat degrading environment as well as it signaled the end of carefree days. In general, graduation from high school was the culmination of formal schooling and one's years of dependency. It was given a significance in youth's lives rivaled only be marriage and parenthood.

The post high school period was dominated by work. While many youth held part-time jobs during high school, everyone was expected to be fully employed following graduation. Indeed, nearly everyone (41) in the sample fulfilled this expectation and appeared to gain substantially in stature and "maturity" in doing so. Frequently, youth found jobs with other Sawyerites in factory, construction, and service work in the urbanizing area twenty-five miles away. All but four youth held blue collar jobs. Only three were employed within Sawyer. In addition to those who held full-time work, five of the seven youth who attended school or who were at home caring for children held part-time positions. Three young men, all ex-servicemen, were unemployed, a condition which Sawyer society appeared to vigorously disdain.

While getting a job after high school was considered an essential part of life, marriage was nearly as imperative for young women. Seventy-five percent of the women in the sample were married and another thirteen percent were engaged. Most had married within two years of graduation and, in discussing the topic with me, indicated how extraordinarily important this event was to their sense of maturity within the community. The few single women, by contrast, appeared to suffer under the burden of spinsterhood (the mother of one, for example, made repeated references during her daughter's interview to her daughter's desire to find a man). Young men apparently marry later than their female peers and, by several accounts, tend to marry younger women. Only three of the young men were or had been married. Young men frequently mentioned a need to "get out" and meet eligible women and some indicated that they attended high school events partly for this purpose. Interestingly, only five of sixteen married youth wed fellow Sawyerites; six others married people from the other three towns in the school district.

A significant corollary to this marital pattern was that nearly all women lived in their own homes while nearly all men lived with their parents. The absence of housing for single people within Sawyer and the fact that living with one's parents as a young adult was not stigmatized made this difference between the sexes quite normal within the culture. Nevertheless, it created remarkably different environments for each sex during this age period (a contrast that indicates potential for quite different developmental paths).

Interestingly, even those males who got away from Sawyer by traveling or by joining the service moved back in with their families when they returned.

These two options (and particularly the military) had longstanding importance to Sawyer males as the predominant means for gaining independence and, as several youth put it, "growing up more". Six males left the community in this manner and all returned to their parents' homes. While young men found ways to assert their independence through the ownership of cars and by operating quite freely within their homes (some paid rent and most came and went at will), most also seemed to expect their cooking, washing, and basic social membership to come from their nuclear families.

Further schooling -- or "going on" -- seemed a realistic choice during this age period primarily for young women. Although two young men tried it, neither finished their vocational program and both returned to Sawyer to work. In a pattern characteristic of rural youth in general, girls did better in high school than boys and more (5) young women went on to school. Only two of these, however, finished the programs they started: one dropped out altogether, two switched from four-year liberal arts or education program to two-year business courses, one finished her four-year liberal arts degree, and one finished her nursing program. In general, these young women felt that they had been unrealistically encouraged to pursue impractical educational ends by parents and the high school. Cutting back on these aspirations and shifting to more functional training has both allowed them to get to work sooner and to settle in Sawyer without foregoing the type of job for which they were trained.

A final characteristic of youths' post-high school years was the importance of living in Sawyer to all of them. Membership in the community and residence within Sawyer's territory was a significant factor in narrowing choices and establishing priorities. Youth stated that the familiarity of people, the presence of family, the quiet and beauty of the land, and the sense of ownership and security youth felt within the community made the thought (and in some cases the effort) of living elsewhere futile. As one young man put it, "they say you'll always come back to your home town so there's not much point in looking anywhere else". For most of the sample, future options and life decisions were influenced significantly by this community factor. Paths leading outward, and perhaps upward, which might appear normal to more cosmopolitan youth were clearly approached with ambivalence by many Sawyer youth.

Three Patterns of Growth

After extensive interviewing of youth and of many of their parents, three patterns of growth emerged which helped to discriminate among young Sawyerites and their developmental self-perceptions. I labeled each pattern with some trepidation; whenever we do something of this sort, we run obvious risks of oversimplifying and potentially of stigmatizing growth patterns. So I offer them as three abstracted and "purified" developmental paths; the reader is cautioned that no single youth fits into any single path.

The pattern to which roughly half the sample adhered was the most fixed and culturally explicit of the three -- I will call it "traditional". Largely inexperienced beyond Sawyer and having "chosen" jobs and mates soon

after high school, these youth appear locked into the time-proven Sawyer rituals of becoming adult. They operate in a small and very familiar world, delimited by the geographic boundaries of Sawyer and revolving around family and life-long social and cultural ties. To them, the rewards of this type of adulthood are the rewards of order; the practically inevitable outcomes of adulthood are the status, the license, and the financial responsibility of the homeowner, the participant at Town Meeting, the mother or father, and the bread winner. Founded on a conception of the world in which life is "hard", these rewards are enough to ensure one the happiness of a quiet, traditional life.

As long as the town remains substantially the same and life permits a little farming, livestock keeping, neighborly socializing, and the luxury of a skiddoo or a trip to the next town for a movie or pizza, these young Sawyerites appear content. Of the three patterns of growth outlined here, this one depends most heavily on the endurance of Sawyer as a rural town and on the survival of its cultural forms. The definition of the traditional youth, his past, and the adulthood of his future, indeed, are determined by the community itself and little beyond.

The second developmental pattern pertained to roughly 40% of the sample. These youth -- the "modern-achieving" -- describe their lives in future-oriented, achievement-motivated terms. They, in fact, are more experienced in the world and, from what I could tell, were more successful in school than the traditional group. Their conceptions of their lives involve the belief that they can get ahead through forward planning and modern occupational choices. Adulthood, for them, involves the pursuit of material goals that

hold the promise of specific developmental goals; one's own job, one's college or travel experience, one's degree, one's modern home are both the ends and the means to a sense of competence, a feeling of importance, and the proof of one's membership in modern America.

Thus, growth is a process of individual movement on several linear tracks. The youth moves from unskilled to a specialized competence, from invisible status in the community to an active and respected one, from a backward, farming tradition to a forward-looking, modern style of life, from childhood to adulthood. In contrast to the traditional youth, these young Sawyerites operate outside the patterns of old Sawyer and, in fact, chart their progress and that of the town by the distance they put between themselves and the "old-fashioned", "narrow-minded", and "boring". As one young woman put it, "you never can stop progress. Sawyer's growing up... We all must grow up... You can't keep a kid long, and you can't keep a town long".

The third set of Sawyer youth -- the "questioning" youth -- is both more experienced outside Sawyer and more uncertain about their futures than the others. Numbering fewer than 10% of the sample, their physical, moral, and sociopolitical worlds spread the widest of all those I interviewed. The intrepid spirit with which most of them approach new and unusual experiences vouches for their desire to maintain an expanded view of the world. Unlike other youth, they strive for the integration of what they have learned is good on the outside (a job skill or friendship, for example) and what they know is good within Sawyer (a stretch of riverfront threatened with development). This effort requires an ideology, a statement of ideals, which reaches above the material and beyond the present. The search for this balance of new and old seems to dominate their reflections upon their very presence within Sawyer and incorporates the ambiguities of

the community's rural roots and modern future as well. They find fault with their elders, with their domination of community life and their small-town myopia, but they also refuse to embrace the grinding work life of the modern adult in spite of the obvious material rewards. They feel an obligation to the community, a consciousness of the value of collective ties and of a familiar if not always supportive human environment.

In contrast to traditional and modern-achieving youth, the questioning youth recognizes the conflicts and paradoxes of Sawyer, where the old-fashioned good life and the modern good life do not seem to meet. For them, the survival of the community and thus of their historical roots is contingent not on protectionism and isolationism, as it is for traditional youth; nor does it hinge on the wholesale modernization of Sawyer through industrial and real estate development, as it seems the modern-achieving youth might have it; instead, these young men and women accept the merits and the inevitability of modernization but seek new ways to integrate it without destroying the old community values and spirit at the same time. The identity of these youth is closely tied to their commitment to assisting Sawyer make this integration.

Growing up does not mean moving away. Clearly, Sawyer presents a variety of indigenous developmental paths, each with its own individual and cultural touchstones. Yet travel and experience outside community seem to have important impacts on how these rural youth see themselves. Traditional youth, who tend not to have lived "away", seem protective and content with the timeless rituals of agrarian Sawyer. Modern-achieving youth, who have had a little more exposure to the outside, seem oblivious to tradition, anxious to make a middle-class existence for themselves and

to do it in Sawyer if possible. Questioning youth, who have experienced the outside world intensely, are most conscious of the "good and bad" and the shades of worth in both worlds. They seem the most intent on making their lives and the future of Sawyer less an either/or choice between old and new than a blending of the benefits of both.

Four Lessons

What does the Sawyer experience tell us? How can our work with rural adolescents gain from recognizing that rural community membership makes growth for them potentially quite distinct from growth as we read about it and may have ourselves experienced it? I propose four lessons.

First, remember that a single conception of development will violate the integrity and diversity of rural people and cultures. Just as developmental theory might have us believe that rural youth should be encouraged to leave home, any other single view of what is right and healthy for adolescents -- all adolescents -- will miss the mark.

Second, differentiate among youth, their aspirations, and the models they draw upon in defining adulthood. I offer three patterns that seem to fit a community I studied; other varieties will fit other places. The essential fact is that rural youth tune their lives to the strains of their home culture; many times, that culture and the community bonds it fosters vary significantly from mainstream America's lessons for growing up.

Third, remember that small community membership has an immense influence of individual development. Just as many Sawyer youth bypassed lifepaths which would take them away from Sawyer, so do, and will, many other rural youth. It is essential that social science and social services respect, legitimize, and help make more viable such choices and the

community-bound forms of adulthood they require.

Fourth, work towards ways to bridge the worlds of native rural communities and modern America without denegrating one or the other. Rather than continue to force a choice between community and individual solvency -- a choice which widens the gap between "backward" rural areas and "modern" America -- find ways to make rural towns viable without dismembering them as communities.

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Note: The name Sawyer, Maine is a pseudonym.